



“Whistling Ben Hanby”

from:

Stories From A Christmas Past

By: Shelley Pearsall

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This story is from the storytelling program
"Stories From A Christmas Past"
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The program was directed by Bette Lou Higgins
and performed by Shelley Pearsall.

Program coordinator for the Western Reserve Historical Society
was Holly Holcombe.

Ben Hanby lived in the small town of Rushville in the 1840's. Now Rushville is a town in Ohio just a little below Oakthorpe and to the right of Dumontville and Lithopolis -- well, actually, it's near Columbus.

There's a museum dedicated to Ben Hanby in Ohio today, near Columbus in Westerville. But back in the 1840's, there wasn't a single person in that little town of Rushville who would have ever dreamed that one day THAT Hanby boy would have a museum all to himself. You see, Ben Hanby was the son of the town preacher, but people in Rushville said there wasn't a single ounce of piety or politeness or ANYTHING religious in him. He was mischievous, loud, and, sometimes, downright rude.

He never sat still -- not in school, not in church. In the middle of his father's sermon, he would be tapping out a rhythm on the church pew. All the people would be sitting there in church just as polite as could be, listening to Reverend Hanby's sermon, and the sound would come from somewhere in the back of the church. Shuffle. Shuffle. Shuffle. Tap. Tap. Tap. Quiet at first, then louder. Shuffle. Shuffle. Shuffle. Tap. Tap. Tap. It sounded like the militia was marching in -- "Ben Hanby," his mother would hiss from across the aisle.

Or in the Rushville school, the schoolteacher might be helping the little children read from their primers, and Ben would start humming. "What's that noise?" she would say, and Ben would stop. But once she turned around ... soon all the children in the back of the room would be humming.

"Ben Hanby," she would yell, "Is that you?"

"Oh no, not me," he'd say, shaking his head. But you could tell he was trying not to laugh.

What Ben Hanby loved to do more than anything, though, was whistle. He could mimic birds like the chickadee, he could call in his dog with one whistle, but most of the time, he made up songs by whistling. Though boys usually grow out of that whistling stage, but Ben Hanby never did. Singing and making music was always one of his favorite pastimes. Even when he became a college student at Otterbein University and started studying to become -- imagine this! -- a MINISTER, he still loved to make music. In the evenings, students and professors would gather at the Hanby house for a rollicking evening of singing and piano-playing that could be heard throughout the entire neighborhood.

It was during one of these evening gatherings that Ben Hanby first introduced a song he wrote, called "Darling Nelly Gray." The group had so much fun singing it, that they convinced him to send it to a publisher. Six months later, his sister was travelling through Columbus and she heard a group of people singing the song. When she asked where they had learned the song, they looked at her strangely and said "Why, it's being sung all over America!" It turned out that Hanby's "Darling Nelly Gray" had been published, and had quickly become famous across the nation. Later, Ben Hanby received the enormous sum of FIFTY DOLLARS for his popular tune.

Well, Ben Hanby didn't let the new-found fame go to his head. He didn't give up the ministry for a career in music. No, he married a well-educated, polite young lady named Kate and settled down to life as a minister.

But five years later, he found himself in trouble once again -- just like those days when he was growing up in Rushville. He was living in New Paris, Ohio at the time, and he had just become the preacher of a small church there. This was his chance. His father had been a good preacher, but he wanted to be a

better one. None of these long, solemn, boring hours in church, like he remembered enduring as a boy. No, his church would be exciting and entertaining. It would have stirring sermons and lively music for the children.

Kate tried to warn him about this. She had heard people whispering and gossiping behind their backs -- saying things like "Children should be memorizing Bible verses" or, "What kind of preacher would ignore his duties and teach the children silly songs instead?" She told Ben Hanby that the people of New Paris seemed kind of stern and severe -- that they didn't seem to approve of his music and celebration in their church.

"Maybe you should just have church services with prayers and hymns, instead of all that other music," she told him. But Ben Hanby just refused to listen. When they said he couldn't have a children's choir in the church, he started one at his home. When they wouldn't give him the music he liked for church, he wrote his own.

He was practicing his music with the children's choir one evening, when one of the members of the church came to the door. The man handed him a letter. It said that the members of the church had decided that they would not allow him to continue his music any longer -- he would either have to give up his music and all the "foolish singing", or he would be forced to resign.

Ben Hanby finally gave up. Angry and bitter, disliked by many members of the church, Ben Hanby turned in his credentials as a minister for good.

But without work, how would he support his young family -- especially with winter coming on? Well,

he decided, he would do what he had always done best -- he would sing. Using an abandoned storeroom on the edge of town, he started his own music school.

Fortunately, in December of that year, a town in Indiana paid him to come and sing for their poor and orphaned children. Since he didn't have the money to buy new music, Ben Hanby sat down one night to write a special song for the occasion. It was a tune that had been in his head for years and years...

It was a snowy, Christmas Eve in 1864, when children sang the song for the first time. The song was called "Santa Claus" then -- although we know it today as "Up on the Housetop." It is Ben Hanby's wonderful musical tale about reindeer and rooftops and old St. Nick.

"Up On the Housetop" is a song which children and adults still love even today. And it seems old St. Nick brought some good fortune to Ben Hanby that Christmas, too. After Ben Hanby wrote "Up On the Housetop", he received a position at a music publishing firm in Chicago, and during the next two years, he became very successful. He wrote and published nearly seventy songs.

And what about those old people back in Rushville? What did they think of all of this? Why they just shook their heads at the news -- who would have thought that so much good would have come from that mischievous, whistling boy -- Ben Hanby?

Notes

Rushville is southeast of Columbus. New Paris is near the Indiana border west of Eaton. Ben Hanby was born in 1833 and died in 1867

Bibliography

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